

Curses and the Sins of Ancestors

FRANCIS THEKKEKKARA

The Theological position on 'Curses' does not seem to be coherent. While some people vehemently proclaim the persistence of curses and their consequences, others deny their existence and attribute them as the figment of imagination of certain 'retreat groups'. Ordinary faithfuls are put in a dilemma. In this context it seems desirable to understand what the word of God has to say on this. In the first instance, we have to understand the meaning of curses. Curses are those things that obstruct blessings.

Curses could be classified into three :

1. Curses that proceed from the word of mouth.

In the Gospel according to St. Mathew we see Jesus cursing a fig tree. "In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again. And the fig tree withered at once" (Mt. 21: 18-19). The disciples of Jesus were amazed at this. Then Jesus told them: "If you have faith and do not doubt" they can do greater things. The above incident vindicates the authority that has been given to man. The word of God also reminds us that one will have to pay a price for every word that is uttered. Therefore: "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (Rom. 12:14).

Though there are several references to curses in the Holy Bible the curse of Joshua on the city of Jericho touched me most. He cursed the city while capturing it. It was completely devastated. He said : "Cursed before the Lord be anyone who tries to build this city - this Jericho! At the cost of his first born he shall lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest he shall set up its gates!" (Joshua. 6:26)

Three hundred years after this curse was pronounced it was fulfilled. In the days of Ahab "Hiel of Bethel built Jericho; he laid its foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke by Joshua son of Nun" (1 Kings. 16:34).

On the curse of a mother, the Book of Sirach says: "For a father's blessing strengthens the houses of the children, but a mother's curse uproots their foundations" (Sirach. 3:9).

Another curse relates to pronouncements made willfully or otherwise that bind oneself. "I am doomed", "it is better to die", "I won't improve" are examples of such self-pronounced curses. In the New Testament there is an eminent testimony of the same. During the trial of Jesus before Pilate the Roman Governor, the Jews who vehemently demanded the crucifixion of Jesus cried out: "His blood be on us and on our children!" (Mt. 27:25). That curse still persists!

2. Curses that proceed from sorcery

We might have heard of the adverse consequences of black magic, enchantment, sorcery etc. "Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel" (Num. 23:23). The Israelites very religiously obeyed the commandments of God. That was why they were

immune to black magic etc. There is another side to this. We read in the Book of Numbers (Ch. 25:2) that Balak, King of Moab when he was convinced that it was impossible to defeat the Israelites as long as they obeyed the Commandments of God, encouraged the women of Moab to seduce men of Israel, thereby transformed the latter as breakers of the Commandments; they forfeited the protection of God and were killed in war. Since those who disobey the Commandments of God lose divine protection diabolic forces are likely to dominate their lives.

3. Curses that come through sin

In fact this is the theme of this essay. When a person goes away from God by committing sin the diabolic influences or powers that emerge in him could be called curse. In other words, curse comes through violation of Commandments. On the other hand, good deeds bring forth blessings. Mention on curses could be seen from verses 14 in Chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis: “The Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel’. To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’ And to the man he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it”, cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ (Gen. 3:14-19)

God told Cain when he killed his own brother Abel out of jealousy: “And now you are cursed from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer of the earth” (Gen. 4:11-12). The above two instances vindicate that the land from which one makes his living too becomes cursed along with the person who grieves/ignores God. “But the Lord did not choose the nation for the sake of the holy place, but the place for the sake of the nation” (2 Mac. 5:19).

There is an eminent illustration for the curses that come through sin in the Book of Samuel. When King David rose from his couch one afternoon, and was walking about on roof of the house he saw a woman bathing: she was Bathsheba, the beautiful wife of Uriah the Hittite. He became lascivious. He despised the word of Lord, killed Uriah with the sword of Ammonites, and took his wife. Then Lord condemns David, through prophet Nathan, “Thus says the Lord I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house: and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly: but I will do this before all Israel and before the sun.”

The word of God reminds that curses emanate from the violation of commandments (Deu. 28:15; Gal. 3:10). In the olden days for those who saw God face-to-face, retribution for sins came instantaneously; these days they could not be perceived instantaneously.

Do sins of the ancestors influence subsequent generations ?

While meditating on this the first thing that comes to one's mind is the sin of Adam and Eve. How was that the sin of Adam became the sin of entire generations? In Adam the whole humanity was like one human body. In the creation of Adam and Eve, the whole of human race was created. Because of this "unity of human race" every one became a participant in the sin of Adam. The word of God says: "But at Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me" (Hos. 6:7). "As a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin (this inclination is called 'concupiscence') (CCC. 418).

"Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of. All subsequent sins would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness" (CCC. 397). If this is the case what is the logic behind the argument (thesis) that only the consequences of the sin of Adam would be transferred to subsequent generations and sins committed subsequent to Adam (in the post - Adam period) would not have any consequences at all? If the sin of Adam had occasioned a curse sufficient to cause death for the whole generations what rationale is there for the thesis that sins committed subsequent to Adam would not be transferred?

In the Book of Baruch it is said: "O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, hear now the prayer of the people of Israel, the children of those who sinned before you, who did not heed the voice of the Lord their God, so that calamities have clung to us" (Bar. 3:4).

Again the Book of Lamentations says: "Our ancestors sinned, they are no more, and we bear their iniquities" (Lam. 5:7). On the consequences of one's sin it is said in the Book of Sirach: "You stained your honor, and defiled your family line, so that you brought wrath upon your children, and they were grieved at your folly" (Sir. 47:20). Because of sin, King Solomon loses his honor; all his family-line gets defiled because of that; they become prey to the wrath of God and grief fills their lives. That the consequences of sin of one person defile the lives of subsequent generations is again vindicated. With each passing generation sinfulness increases and human nature gradually becomes less and less able to subdue it; in consequence sin enslaves the human race and incapacitates it to do any good at all. It is for this reason that St. Paul in his epistle to the Romans writes: "I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Rom. 7:14-17). The influence of the sins of ancestors makes one unable to survive sinful temptations and transforms him to a slave of sin! "This dramatic situation of 'the whole world which is in the power of the evil one' makes man's life a battle" (CCC. 409).

Will children be punished for the sins of ancestors?

We shall examine what the Gospel says on this : "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generations of those who reject me" (Ex. 20:5). "Yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generations" (Ex. 34:7) "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression. But by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation" (Num. 14:18). "You shall not

bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation for those who reject me”(Deu. 5:9). “You show steadfast love to the thousandth generation, but repay the guilt of parents into the laps of their children after them” (Jer. 32:18). “I will not keep silent, I will repay; I will indeed repay into their laps their iniquities and their ancestors’ iniquities together, says the Lord” (Is. 65:6-7). “See, we are today in our exile where you have scattered us to be reproached and cursed and punished for all the iniquities of our ancestors, who forsook the Lord our God” (Bar. 3:8).

In the Gospel according to St. Mathew it is said: “If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets” (Mt. 23:30). By counter logic it means that we are (they were) participants in the iniquities of our (their) ancestors. And that was why Jesus told them: “Upon you may come all the righteous bloodshed on earth, from the blood of the righteous Abel to the blood of Zachariah, Son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation” (Mt. 23:35-36). “Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of their father. Let them never rise to possess the earth or cover the face of the world with cities (Is. 14:21)

Though King David was dear to the Lord he lost a son because of his iniquities. “Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die” (2 Sam. 12:14). Sins of ancestors certainly cause punishment to subsequent generations, it is clear.

In the book of Jeremiah it is said: “In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge” (Jer. 31:29-30). However, these are about the coming days; it may be noted. On that the word of God says: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more” (Jer. 31:35). It is difficult to accept that this day has come. This is only a prophecy. The fact that St. Paul in his letter to the Hebrews (many centuries later) recounts this prophecy (Ch. 8:8-12) corroborates the argument that the day is yet to come and therefore what is prophesied would be realised only when the day comes.

“Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death” (Deu. 24:16). This word of God is sometimes put forward to negate curses. However, the context in which this was stated may be noted. It was stated as one among the 613 rules that a Jew had to comply with in life. The above rule, however, is current even at present. A father will not be punished (put to death) in lieu of his son and vice versa. The said word of God only means so much. It does not mean that the consequences (fruits) of the deeds of the parents will not be transmitted to the subsequent generations. That is, though the responsibility of a deed committed by a person rests with the person who did it, its consequences - blessings or curses - shall be transmitted to

subsequent generations. To bear the brunt (curse) for the sins of the ancestors is punishment indeed!

Besides sins, the good works of the ancestors also influence the subsequent generations. "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generations of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6). The above word of God reveals the depth, height, and width of the love of God the Father. The merciful love of the Father that reaches to the thousandth generation (infinite!) of those who love him but restraining His punishment to the third and fourth generations of those who reject Him - is inexplicable !!

Instances of those who have enjoyed the love of God the Father are numerous in the Bible. The book of Sirach says of King David: "After him a wise son rose up who because of him lived in security" (Sir. 47:12). The life of Solomon got blessed because of King David. Similarly numerous generations have got blessed because of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Be it blessing or curse, descendants do inherit the consequences of the deeds of the previous generations.

Personal responsibility of sin

Adam and Eve seem to evade the personal responsibility of sin. While Adam blames Eve the latter puts the onus on the Serpent, but without success. Chapter 18 of Ezekiel deals with the personal responsibility of sin. The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel" (Ez. 18:1-3). Let us examine what this means there existed a period during which "death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam" (Rom 5:14). But when the Lord God gave commandments through Moses, death lost its dominion over those who obeyed them; in the process they were exonerated from the stigma of the sins of ancestors. Keeping commandments is an individual responsibility and therefore one cannot evade it. That is why the word of God says: "Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine : it is only the person who sins that shall die" (Ez. 18:4). Though there may not remain even traces of sin left as vestiges of the sins of ancestors, the possibility of people turning to sin due to concupiscence cannot be ruled out.

Is there not deliverance from curses?

"I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me" (Roma. 7:9-11). Grieved at the plight of humanity God the Father "sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Roma 8:3). "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13).

"Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom 5:18). That is, the sin of Adam made everyone sinners but the crucifixion of Christ has saved them all. By the very fact that all of us are children of Adam we are sinners. But to become righteous, ie. to attain salvation one has to

become God's child. "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (Jn.1:12). Mere faith is not sufficient, but one has to obey the commandments as well in order to become children of God. "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (Jn. 14:23). Then only we can establish our due right as children of God. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Rom. 8:14). "It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17). That is, only those who are led by the Spirit of God will attain salvation. Our participation in the redemptive suffering of Christ would cleanse our sins and deliver us from our curses. In sum, only those who believe in Christ would be saved.

Here is a catch. Through becoming a heir to Christ one obtains deliverance from curses, but curses perse and the evil forces behind them prevail. Therefore the tendency to commit sin would persist because of the insistent temptations proceeding from them. Succumbing to those temptations leads to forfeiture of heirship to Christ and thence to dominion of curses. That is why it is said: "When an unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'. When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first" (Mt. 12:43-45).

Is it possible to neutralize curses?

Curses emanate from violation of commandments - ie. sins : "But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you." (Deu. 28:15). A curse would cease to exist only when the sin or violation of a particular commandment that emanated is forgiven. Therefore if a person dies without obtaining forgiveness of sins, his sins and the curses that emanate from them would prevail. Numerous generations of people have died without obtaining proper forgiveness of sins and therefore, the present generation is constrained to bear the burden of their sins.

We shall therefore confess the sins of our ancestors who have died without obtaining forgiveness of sins (Neh. 9:2; Jer. 14:20; Lam. 5:7; Bar. 3:4). We shall also beseech God's mercy for the forgiveness of their sins along with making sin-offering so that Merciful God would forgive their sins and take away the curses. Accordingly they (souls of ancestors) usher into salvation, concurrently showering blessings on the living.

Why Curses?

A curse is not an eternal punishment. When Adam and Eve sinned they became accursed and were expelled from the paradise. But God promised them a Saviour and saved them in the fullness of time. Similarly when Cain became accursed, the Merciful God put a mark upon Cain so that no one who came upon him would kill him. For the present generation God has given a promise through the prophet Malachi : "I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.... so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse" (Mal. 4:5-6). This has been said in Sirach 48:10 also. When we delve deep into the divine mysteries curses in fact appear as symbols of divine love and mercy. They serve as sign posts of the nature and gravity of the iniquities of the ancestors and a warning to the present generation not to repeat but to go back from them. In a broader sense this is but disciplining. A

father who does not want to see any of his children lost but wants everyone saved cannot refrain from disciplining (Heb. 12:6-8). “When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you and from there he will bring you back. The Lord your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deu. 30:1, 6). That is, curses are intended to save.

All the generations starting from the period of Adam to the present day could be divided into two, the first from Adam to Noah, and second from Noah to the present day. All the generations that thrived from Adam were ultimately reduced to eight persons of the family of Noah, who survived the great Flood. The whole of the present humanity are the descendants of Noah. When the first generation indulged in sin, God punished them through the great Flood but did not forsake them eternally. In the fullness of time a great sanctification of all the previous generations was consummated when Jesus, after his crucifixion descended into hell and delivered the souls imprisoned there. Included among them were those “who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark”(1 Pt. 3:19; CCC. 634). Here a doubt may arise. Why were the curses that emanated from the sin of Adam not condoned along with the forgiveness of sins that he obtained? Why not original sin too could get condoned? We may remember one thing. Prior to Adam obtaining forgiveness of sins, the seeds of sin that he had sowed had dispersed far and wide. For eg: the sapling of a tree in course of time grows, flourishes and bears fruit. If it is cut down after many years the fruits that it bore and the saplings they germinated do not cease to exist. The latter grows up and bears fruit. Similarly as long as a person continues to be in sin ie. till his penitential return, they (sins) would continue to produce their natural fruits- curses. However, abrupt penitence reduces the duration of curses.

The last lines of the Old Testament say: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5). That is, God will make way to remember and pray for the ancestors and thereby to liberate generations from curses. When the persons who claim themselves to be the spokesmen of the kingdom of God proclaim the non- existence of curses they are in fact sabotaging the divine design to save the world from curses. This is perhaps the last opportunity to save the souls. Prayers intended at their salvation is not therefore a sign of our largesse but a duty of this generation; it shall be done in earnest; it shall be accompanied by acts of atonement and sin-offering. Let generations be freed; we too shall experience deliverance from curses. Let the world experience peace; let the fortresses of Satan crumble and God’s plans succeed. We shall strive towards that end. May God bless us all.